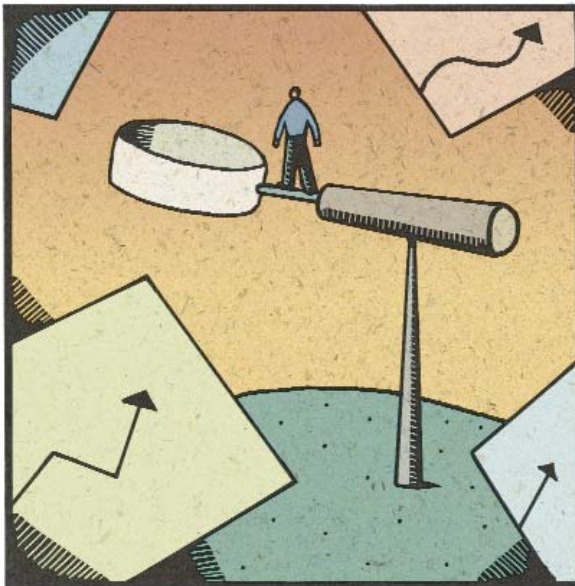




overview


The best of times and the worst of times tend to speak for themselves. Booms and busts are relatively easy to describe. The more complex of times, however, are more challenging in their possible interpretations.

The following annual report of the Southern California Association of Governments, *The State of the Region 2001*, encodes in its array of facts and statistics a complex message regarding an increasingly complex region. That complexity, moreover, has been further compounded after 11 September 2001—to a degree not yet measurable—



by global forces beyond the control of the SCAG region yet profoundly effecting its destiny.

In its array of graphs, charts, statistics, spot evaluations, and extended essays, *The State of the Region 2001* reveals a society that is continuing to improve its circumstances and prospects along multiple lines of development. In so many sectors—employment, housing, transportation, air quality, water resources, solid waste management, environmental protection—the six-county SCAG region is showing solid progress. In some areas, in fact—crime rates, infant mortality, international trade, travel, and tourism (before 11 September, of course)—progress has been more than solid. It has been impressive. In no category whatsoever, moreover, even in the ever-problematic disparity between rich and poor—are the statistics of the report catastrophic. True, the poor are remaining poor, but they are not remaining poor or becoming poor at the alarming rates of the early 1990s, and significant numbers are making transitions into less embattled categories. In another long-standing problem area, education, there are signs of movement in the right direction. The bad news is that too many students are graduating from high school without adequate reading and mathematical skills. The good news, however, is that remedial programs, both in the high schools and at the community college and CSU levels, are showing appreciable results. Even the energy crisis, which when it first surfaced, threatened California with the apocalyptic possibility of crippling rolling blackouts, shows signs of




stabilization in regional terms, while remaining destabilized at the level of state finance.

In one sense, then, *The State of the Region 2001*, is an optimistic report. No sector of the SCAG region, no aspect of its economy, is in a state of decline, much less catastrophic collapse. True, an element of anxiety can frequently surface in two perspectives. Certain aspects of the economy—manufacturing, for example, with its unmatched ability to employ entry-level workers—are not recovering from the collapse of the early 1990s at the desired rate or are being forced further and further towards the edges of the SCAG region, or even out of the SCAG region completely, to remain competitive. And secondly, some aspects of the economy—the jobs/housing balance, most noticeably—are being destabilized by growth. On the one hand, economic growth is welcomed, as is its dispersion throughout the region. On the other hand, such growth, when combined with either cumbersome or elitist land-use policies, can fuel sprawl in a region that, having suburbanized the plain between the mountains and the sea, is now reaching its topographical limits.

The question of growth, together with the increasing complexity of the SCAG region, accounts for the faint but persistent disquiet that pervades the generally optimistic information and evaluations of this report. This disquiet is perhaps why the optimism of this report is so subtly guarded. It is a disquiet coming, again and again, from a repeated,

albeit implied, question that rises to the level of a leitmotif. Is the six-county SCAG region doing enough? Even more disquieting, can the governments of the SCAG region do enough under present circumstances to deal with the complexities of a future which, while mysterious, even frightful, is already upon us?

Again and again, questions arise in section after section of this report that are questions that come from the general success of the region. How wonderful, even flattering, it is that each week thousands and thousands of people are moving into the SCAG region in search of a better life? Can land use policies and procedures, however, be voluntarily adjusted—by local decision, that is, not by Sacramento edict or, worse, by a punishing statewide initiative—to house and employ them within the matrix of smart growth? It is a good thing, a very good thing, that crime is down; the crime that is down is the crime that has a special power to maim others in body and spirit and to destroy the perpetrator as well. But if the manufacturing sector is for various reasons, including excessive regulation, lagging in its rate of growth, how are these young people who are resisting the temptations of crime going to find their future in the SCAG region? Not everyone is destined to become a computer programmer or a rocket scientist. A society that is failing to foster the manufacturing sector is endangering whole portions of the population, most of them in their younger years, for whom a job is not only security, but a way of staying on the right side of the law.



At various times, in fact, *The State of the Region 2001* circles around the growing and ominous possibilities of not only a two-tier society, but a three- and/or four-tier society as well. The report, for example, is anxious over such disparate but inter-related phenomena as the growing expense of daily life in the region, housing especially, the developing ghettos of poor and elite, so often tied to ethnicity, the growing complexity of skills needed for socioeconomic survival and the efforts of the educational sector to provide them, precisely because these phenomena underscore the possibilities of the bifurcation, even tri-furcation, of the SCAG region into separated societies hostile to one another.

Yet *The State of the Region 2001* also shows a society that is, ultimately, doing its best to stay together, to deal with its problems, and is meeting with significant success in this effort. The challenges facing the region constitute a form of compliment. Other regions might rest content with the solid progress in so many sectors that is so evident in this report. Yet other regions are not, perhaps, animated by the same powerful expectations of a better way of life. History itself is challenging the governments of SCAG in this report. Take the peoples of the world, all of them, native born and immigrants alike, and fuse them into a society that is efficiently, justly, and wisely governed; that is economically vital and environmentally responsible; that is nurturing of everyday life and value and humanistically apportioned in its land use: that is responsive to high technology yet not over-valuing it at the expense of the manufacturing sector;

that prizes the ordinary and the extraordinary, the day laborer and the rocket scientist. What a challenge! And yet, for more than 100 years, the communities represented in this report, have been struggling towards such compelling goals—not always successfully, of course, and not always fairly or wisely, but always with a sense that this portion of California, this six-county region, embodies at a most intense level the composite promise of America.

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